

Will Power
Mark 8:27-38
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I talked last week with a gentle, strong old man. I was called at night because he had just lost his wife of many years. Her death was preceeded by a very sad and agonizing sequence of events: and this amplified the normal pain of grief. As I drove I thought about what I might say -- what does one say in a situation like this? Words are not adequate. I tried to say, simply, "I'm sorry": but before I could speak the carefully chosen words he said, "It's inevitable: we all must face it sometime: I shall miss her," almost as if he was somehow trying to comfort me -- as if he sensed my anxiety and wanted to allay it.

We talked about her, what she had meant to him. We laughed about good times and talked about fishing and mountain streams and coal mining. We read the 23rd Psalm and prayed together and I left. And back in the car on the way home I felt lifted up by what had transpired. I concluded that I had just met an exceptional man, a man with deep faith and tremendous personal strength. I identified the resource from which he was drawing in his grief as will power. Or power of will. In a situation that well could have prompted the collapse of a normal personality, this gentlemen was not letting go. Grieving to be sure: but he was in control. The event of his wife's death was not managing him. He had incorporated it, integrated it and was still very much a responsible human being. That's will power.

This is a sermon about will power, or power of will. But unlike many sermons on the topic which come across as righteous indictments of weak-willed laymen, let it here be acknowledged that this one comes from one who attempts, at least twice annually, to quit smoking, and who so far has ignominiously failed.

Be that as it may, we are in, I believe, a crisis of will, as a civilization, as a culture, and as a church. And the will power I am talking about

is something infinitely more profound than steeling oneself for quitting smoking or avoiding between meal snacks.

Do you remember the excellent motion picture Marty from several years ago. It was widely acclaimed for its honesty and its penetrating analysis of life. Marty was what our culture calls "a nice guy"; i.e. the kind of person Leo Durocher said finished last. He was a person to whom things happen but who never makes things happen, the eternal victim of circumstance. In one particular sequence Marty phoned a friend for the purpose of deciding what to do that evening. The conversation went something like this "What do you wanna do tonight?" "I don't know, Marty. What do you wanna do?" "I don't know, what do you wanna do?" etc. etc. They ended up drinking beer in the tavern, which is what they ended up doing every other night of their lives.

Marty found self-esteem and responsibility and power of will in a woman he loved and who returned his love. But the significance of the film was in the fact that contemporary American life is like that phone conversation for a lot of people. Rather than the master of all he surveys modern man is one to whom things happen but who rarely has any sense of making them happen: a leaf perennially floating in the stream of life, a stream that can get pretty turbulent, constantly drifting, buffeted to and fro by the currents and eddies, never in control of his destination. In fact, the matter of responsibility for the destination seems to have been given over entirely to the current, to the large, impersonal forces of our society. That is the crisis of will in which we find ourselves.

It wasn't always like that, of course. The Victorian concept of will power that informed Western civilization so significantly was a rigid self-discipline that was the last guardian against immorality. In the Victorian sense a man was totally responsible for his behavior and his destiny.

But along came Sigmund Freud who studied the ill effects of Victorian will power and concluded that there is a lot going on in the individual over which he has no control. And that classical will power involves a whole lot

of self deceit and consequently a lot of guilt. Freud was led to conclude that man is driven by his "unconscious"; that free will, and therefore will power, are illusions. And that personal responsibility for who one is and what one does and where one goes in life is pure mythology.

Now, Sigmund Freud contributed brilliantly to man's self understanding, and it is impossible to contemplate the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry apart from his work. But he also helped lay to rest a very important concept, namely, will power, perhaps inadvertantly, but nevertheless it happened.

Add to Freud's impact on the personality sciences, Karl Marx's influence in the social sciences and you have the class room analysis of how we got into a crisis of will. Marx suggested that who a man is and what he does and where he goes are determined by economic motives and forces. Dialectical materialism he called it. And like the theories of Freud the result is the removal, of personal responsibility - power of will - lock, stock and barrel, from the individual and his rationale thought processes, and the depositing of the same out there somewhere or in here somewhere; which in either case means it is inaccessible to you and me, and that we are pretty helpless.

Rollo May, immanent psychoanalyst, in his book "Love and Will" puts it this way talking about the influence of Freud: ".... It reflected, rationalized and played into the hands of modern man's most pervasive tendency - which has become almost an endemic disease in the middle of the twentieth century - to see himself as passive, the willy-nilly product of the powerful juggernaut of psychological drives." [p. 183] "The inherited basis of our capacity for will and decision has been irrevocably destroyed." [p. 182]

That's where we are today, and I would suggest that all of us, at times, have experienced in a very personal way, a feeling of helplessness and powerlessness: a feeling that we are not at all in control of our lives: that our power of will is simply non-existent.

Let's think about that. Let's think about will power, not as self-

restraint, but as personal strength to exercise control, to make decisions and to make them matter.

There is no denying that we are up against large and powerful and impersonal forces. Consider something as simple as a trip to the doctor's office - or a stay in a hospital. If you've ever had an appointment for one o'clock and seen your doctor at four o'clock, you have experienced the total negation of your power. In a recent conference at St. Elizabeth hospital the whole problem of the patient's feeling of powerlessness was identified as a major problem in health care. The process of being admitted to the hospital and undergoing treatment is, in fact, a handing over of personal responsibility for one's self to someone else: often to a mysterious, impersonal institution represented by doctor's who don't spend enough time with you and the dietician somewhere deep down in the basement who never hears your plaintiff cry for sugar in your coffee. In that setting your will power just doesn't exist. And slowly we're coming to see that this is why many patients complain about service and food and bed linens. It's simply a last ditch effort to salvage a little power of will and to say "I'm still me."

Consider what it's like to be old and poor - a devastating combination in this community. One elderly couple sent their air-conditioner in for repairs and the repair shop kept it for two months, then lost it, and finally came up with a replacement model that didn't work. No amount of phone calls from them worked: they had will but no power and then, subtly, no will. They just gave up.

Consider the invasion of your privacy by the whole complex of businesses involved in consumer credit. In a recent article in Saturday Review, Ralph Nader documented the whole frightening business and pointed out that you and I have no control. Miss one payment, or refuse payment because of a faulty product, or worse yet - offend your neighbor whose assessment of you will be on your credit dossier, and you may be done for life.

There is no denying that the individual who wishes to be in control is up against it. And through it all, more and more people accept their passive role, their powerlessness as inevitable. Through it all, I believe, we learn to be indecisive, we learn not to make decisions, and when we do, not to expect them to matter. Through it all I see an abdication of personal responsibility, a surrender of personal power of will. And the confession - "My decisions don't matter: my opinions don't matter: I don't matter."

Now, in all of this, and I apologize for the length of time it took me to get here, there is emerging a very low doctrine of man. Excused from responsibility for my behavior by Dr. Freud: absolved of responsibility for the body politic by Mr. Marx: and stripped of any power and control by the large, impersonal forces of society, I really don't amount to very much. I have no power of will.

But over against this view, which I would define as the crisis of will, is the Biblical view of man. This view elevates man to a position a little lower than God himself, and a whole lot above the rest of creation. The Bible sees man as the responsible agent in the whole created order, the decision maker, the one with dominion and power and authority. In terms of nature, the first chapter of Genesis makes man "co-creative" with God, and therefore very much responsible for the state of the ecology. It suggests that you and I - and no one else - are the ones whose decisions determine the future. The Bible suggest that man is a free agent in creation, regardless of what Freud and Marx said, and that ultimately we do bear responsibility for who we are and what we do and where we go.

It's interesting, along these lines, that the whole area of psychiatry and psychoanalysis is slowly moving back in this direction.

In Rollo May's book that I cited earlier he describes the dilemma:

"Toward the end of analysis the therapist may find himself wishing that the patient were capable of more 'push', more 'determination' a greater willingness 'to make the best of it'. Often the wish eventuates in remarks

to the patient; 'People must help themselves'; 'Nothing worthwhile is achieved without effort'; 'You have to try'. . . Often an analyst feels uncomfortable about such appeals, as though he were using something he didn't believe in."
[p. 197]

Well, however hesitant and apologetic it may be, it is a move in the right direction. For in the final analysis we are responsible - and we must exercise that power of will. And if you want to put the academic argument in the context of something very immediate and very relevant, think for a minute about sexual morality. Young people today are living in a time when human sexuality is rightly and openly celebrated. They are also living in a time when all the old prohibitions are being eliminated. Theoretically, one can do what one pleases without all those terrible things happening that our parents warned would occur. And if ever there was a need for people who have real power of will, real strength, real ability to make a decision: real control over the situation, it is right now. Young people have been forced into a situation in which they must make decisions daily, that were made for us. And they need, more than anything the self esteem and confidence that will allow them to make those decisions responsibly.

One day Jesus and his disciples were walking along between villages. He asked them what appeared to be an innocent question: "Who do men say I am?" "What are people saying about me?" And to that academic question they gave an academic reply: "Some are saying you're John the Baptist, others Eljiah or one of the prophets." But then he turned the beacon of responsibility on them personally. "And you," he asked, "who do you say that I am?" They had the power, they had to decide, they had the power of will to determine who they would be in relation to this man. And Peter exercised it: "You are the Messiah."

That's when it all comes to a head. President Harry S. Truman had a sign on his desk that read, "The Buck Stops Here". Well, in terms of the life and death decisions we are called to make; in terms of who we are and

who we will be, the buck stops with each one of us individually. In matters religious the most tragic thing of all is that many people pass the buck. They are passive about Jesus Christ. Faith, it is assumed, is another of those powerful, outside forces that comes to a man.

But here, in this brief transaction between Jesus and his friends, we see that it isn't so. Christian faith begins when I exercise my powers of will and say - "This man is my Lord." That is what Peter did: and that is the crisis of will to which each one of us is called.

How is it with you? Is your faith in Jesus Christ a lukewarm sentiment dependent on whim and whimsy? Or can you stand tall and say: "This day I decide. Jesus Christ is my Lord"?

Amen.

Our father, you have given us the precious but troublesome gift of freedom. Help us to be men - as you created us to be. Grant us the moral courage to bear responsibility for who we are. And grant us grace to will to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

Amen.